PITTA

Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 19 Number 2 February 2022

Trip Report: South Andaman Islands, Dec 17-22, 2021

Text & Photos: Aditya Rao

Daurian Starling flock

South Andaman Island (Source: ebird.org)

Introduction

Andaman and Nicobar Islands is a group of 572 islands from 6° to 14° North latitudes and from 92° to 94° East longitudes. It has been isolated from the mainland for several million years, giving rise to unique and rich biodiversity and creating a hotspot for endemic flora and fauna.

It has always been my dream to visit Andaman Islands, especially for birding, given its diverse avifauna. The pandemic had not helped, but the waning of the pandemic, coupled with vaccinations, really bolstered our hopes and we decided to visit at least South Andaman Islands in the month of December 2021. The best time to visit is ideally between October-February (winters) given that it is a hotspot for several migratory birds as well.

Given that it is an island, it has highly diverse habitats, including giant evergreen forests, tropical forests, mangrove forests and bamboo forests, all transitioning into each other and making it extremely suitable for a variety of fauna to thrive. One very surprising aspect is that the evergreen forests are extremely thick and rich despite it being isolated and far away from the main landmasses of South Asia.

Avian Endemicity

The isolation of Andaman and Nicobar Islands has resulted in several birds becoming endemic, and some sub-species have deviated genetically, for example the Scarlet Minivet (*Pericrocotus speciosus*) – though common in mainland India, the sub-species found in Andamans has genetically diverged (*P. s. andamanensis* Beavan, 1867); the same applies to many resident birds over the last several million years.

Scarlet Minivet male

Another interesting observation is that the Red-whiskered Bulbul has proliferated significantly and diverged giving rise to *Pycnonotus jocosus whistleri* [1] that has a slightly browner back when compared to the original *Pycnonotus jocosus*. There is a belief that it was not introduced recently to the islands [3].

Red-whiskered Bulbul

Endemic Birds of Andaman & Nicobar Islands

There are 20 bird species that are endemic to the Andaman Islands, and another 8 that are endemic to Nicobar Islands.

Given below is a list of these species; I have highlighted the ones that we were able to record (either see or hear). We did not go beyond the South Andaman Islands, or to the Narcondam Island, which lies approximately 75km east of North Andaman, so we missed out on the Narcondam Hornbill and the Nicobar endemics. Hopefully our next sojourn will take to these beautiful islands to spot these endangered birds.

(Note: Although the Nicobar Imperial Pigeon is named that way, the bird in not endemic to just Nicobar Islands, but rather found across Malay Archipelago and as far as Solomons [5]).

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Usually seen at	Whether recorded by us
1	Andaman Serpent Eagle	*Spilornis elgini*	Andaman	Seen
2	Andaman Crake	*Rallina canningi*	Andaman	Seen
3	Andaman (or Brown) Coucal	*Centropus andamanensis*	Andaman Islands	Seen
4	Andaman Scops Owl	*Otus balli*	Andaman Islands	Seen
5	Hume's Boobook (or Hume's Hawk Owl)	*Ninox obscura*	Andaman Islands	Seen
6	Andaman Barn Owl	*Tyto deroepstorffi*	Andaman Islands	Seen
7	Andaman Nightjar	*Caprimulgus andamanicus*	Andaman Islands	Seen
8	Narcondam Hornbill	*Rhyticeros narcondami*	Narcondam Island	Not visited
9	Andaman Woodpecker	*Dryocopus hodgei*	Andaman Islands	Seen
10	Andaman Drongo	*Dicrurus andamanensis*	Andaman Islands	Seen
11	Andaman Treepie	*Dendrocitta bayleyii*	Andaman Islands	Seen
12	Andaman Shama	*Copsychus albiventris*	Andaman Islands	Heard
13	Andaman Bulbul	*Pycnonotus fuscoflavescens*	Andaman Islands	Seen
14	Andaman Cuckooshrike	*Coracina dobsoni*	Andaman Islands	Seen
15	Andaman Flowerpecker	*Dicaeum virescens*	Andaman Islands	Seen
16	Andaman Wood Pigeon	*Columba palumboides*	Andaman Islands	Not recorded
17	Andaman Green Pigeon	*Treron chloropterus*	Andaman Islands	Seen
18	Andaman Cuckoo Dove	*Macropygia rufipennis*	Andaman Islands	Seen

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Usually seen at	Whether recorded by us
19	Andaman Boobook (or Andaman Hawk Owl)	*Ninox affinis*	Andaman Islands	Seen
20	White-headed starling	*Sturnia erythropygia*	Andaman Islands	Seen
21	Nicobar Imperial Pigeon	*Ducula nicobarica*	Nicobar Islands	Not visited
22	South Nicobar Serpent Eagle	*Spilornis klossi*	Nicobar Islands	Not visited
23	Nicobar Sparrowhawk	*Accipiter butleri*	Nicobar Islands	Not visited
24	Nicobar Parakeet	*Psittacula caniceps*	Nicobar Islands	Not visited
25	Nicobar Bulbul	*Ixos nicobariensis*	Nicobar Islands	Not visited
26	Nicobar Jungle Flycatcher	*Cyornis nicobaricus*	Nicobar Islands	Not visited
27	Nicobar Scops Owl	*Otus alius*	Nicobar Islands	Not visited
28	Nicobar Megapode or Nicobar Scrubfowl	*Megapodius nicobariensis*	Nicobar Islands	Not visited

Trip details

While birding in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands requires about 10 days at a minimum, about 4-5 days is sufficient to cover all the IBAs in the South Andaman Islands and record most of the endemic, resident and migrant species. We were fortunate to record (see or hear) almost all the Andaman endemics except the coveted Andaman Wood Pigeon, which is becoming hard to spot, given the incessant loss to habitat, development and possibly 'birding tourism' that sees people overusing bird calls.

We were guided by a local birder who assisted us with all the logistics of the trip. As our primary purpose was birding all day, we stayed at a basic but well-maintained hotel in Port Blair that was central enough for all our outings.

Eastern Yellow Wagtail

Day-1: Dec 17, 2021

Location: Burmanallah Beach (morning session) and Chidiya Tapu (evening session)

We set out first to a rocky beach adjacent to a small forest patch called the Burmanallah where, apart from several sandpipers and the Whimbrel, we also spotted the Collared Kingfisher, the Eastern Yellow Wagtail and a few shore birds.

Collared Kingfisher

Whimbrel

Pacific Golden Plover

Ruddy Turnstone

We then headed to the Biological Park located at Chidiya Tapu, which has a large walkway and a conservation area, for some endemic as well as some resident species. Chidiya Tapu sustains a typical Andaman evergreen forest with extremely large and tall trees and is a treat to the eyes. It should be noted that the entire stretch from Burmanallah is a reserved forest on one side and agricultural patches on the other; it is worth stopping for birding along the way.

Green Imperial Pigeon & Alexandrine Parakeet

Red-breasted Parakeet

Though we had wanted to avoid doing any sort of night-birding, the guide assured us that we will be able to spot some of the nocturnal birds near abandoned buildings and forest thickets in their natural settings. Lo and behold, to our surprise the nocturnal birds were active at around 5.00PM (when it starts getting darker at that longitude) and we heard several owl calls, and saw some of the owls flying around as twilight came upon us. We were fortunate to spot, record and photograph two important endemic owls – the Andaman Boobook and Hume's Boobook.

Andaman Boobook

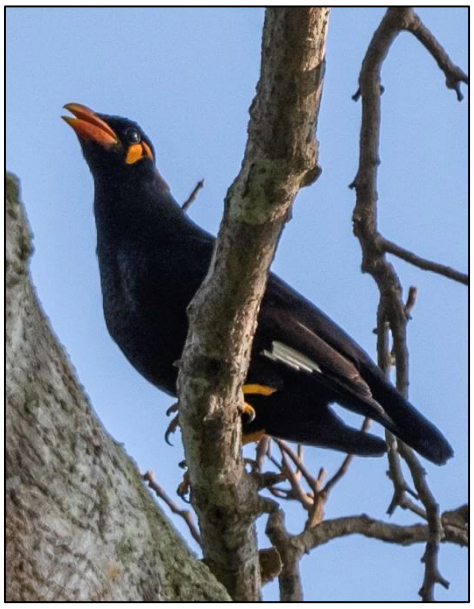
Hume's Boobook

Day-2: Dec 18, 2021

Location: Chidiyatapu Forest Patch and Biological Park (morning session) and Ograbraj Wetlands (evening session)

The morning, as with birding anywhere, was extremely productive. We used the opportunity to bird on the way as we drove to Chidiya Tapu forest patch (about 1 hour south of Port Blair). We happened to document several endemic and resident birds, as the weather was excellent and it was the middle of the migratory season.

Chestnut-headed Bee-eater



Common Hill Myna

Andaman Drongo

Freckle-breasted Woodpecker

Stork-billed Kingfisher

Brown-backed Needletail

Vernal Hanging-parrot

Orange-headed Thrush

Black-naped Oriole male

Andaman Plume-toed Swiftlet

Andaman Treepie

Emerald Dove

White-headed Starling

Post our extensive and busy morning session, we returned in the evening to watch wetland birds and paid a visit to Ograbraj Wetlands specifically to see the endangered Andaman Teals, but unfortunately, though we could spot a large flock flying over, we could not photograph them. We did find other migrants and resident local birds in the wetlands. One interesting spotting was the Oriental Darter, that had not been spotted or recorded before and we were lucky enough to spot it that day.

Oriental Darter

Andaman Masked Owl

Day-3: Dec 19, 2021
Location: Kalatang forest area and Ograbraj Wetlands

The entire day was spent birding at Kalatang forest areas and Ograbraj Wetlands. It was an interesting day, and we were able to find many endemics including the Andaman Woodpecker, Andaman Green Pigeon and the Andaman Teals that we had only seen flying over the previous day.

Long-tailed Parakeet

Asian Fairy Bluebird

Andaman Green Pigeon

Andaman Woodpecker

Andaman Teal

Oriental Dollarbird

White-bellied Sea Eagle juvenile

White-breasted Woodswallow

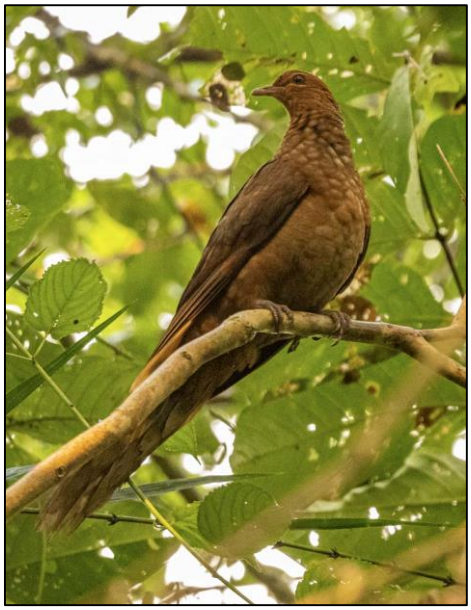
Andaman Nightjar

Day-4: Dec 20, 2021
Location: Shoal Bay

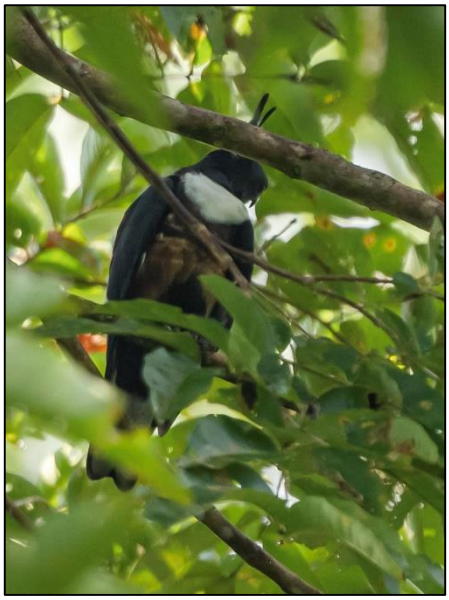
Day 4 was mostly spent trying to explore the evergreen forests of South Andamans near Shoal Bay, which has dense thick forest with extremely tall trees supporting some of the endemics. We were able to see some wonderful species like the Andaman Bulbul, Andaman Coucal and Andaman Cuckoo Dove.

White-bellied Sea Eagle adult

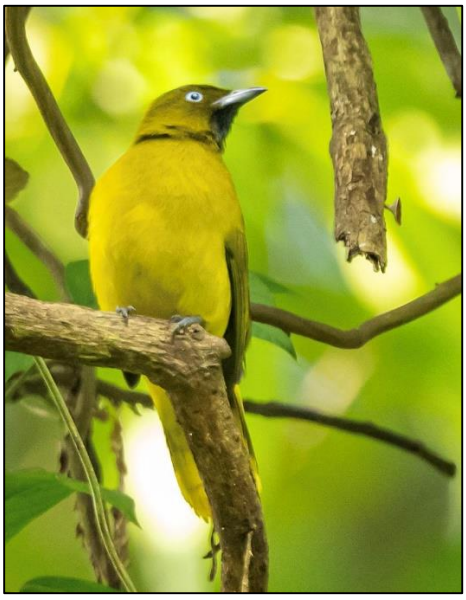
Andaman Cuckooshrike



Andaman Cuckoo Dove



Black Baza



Andaman Bulbul

Scarlet Minivet female

Andaman Coucal

Day-5: Dec 21, 2021
Location: Southern Andaman Islands

This day was spent mostly on visiting some important wetlands and forest patches around the Southern part of Andaman Islands. The day yielded some important and very interesting species like the Oriental Scops Owl, the Andaman Serpent Eagle and the Pacific Reef Heron (white morph).

Olive-backed Sunbird

Oriental Scops Owl

Black-naped Oriole female

Andaman Serpent Eagle

Day-6: Dec 22, 2021
Location: Southern Andaman Islands

Day 6 was essentially spent visiting a local beach where we birded for a short while and concluded our birding sojourn and returned home. But we were still able to add some sought-after species like the Daurian Starling and the Brown Shrike (Philippine), with the grey wash on the head.

Daurian Starling

Pacific Reef Heron white morph

Brown Shrike (Philippine)

Brown Shrike

References

1. https://avibase.bsc-eoc.org/species.jsp?avibaseid=28852BAF7B700492
2. https://avibase.bsc-eoc.org/checklist.jsp?region=INan
3. P. Rajan & P. Pramod, November 2012, Introduced birds of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, India, https://indianbirds.in/
4. https://ebird.org/species/narhor1
5. https://ebird.org/species/nicpig1

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo

The full list of birds seen is given below:

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Alexandrine Parakeet	*Psittacula eupatria*	29	Brown Shrike	*Lanius cristatus*
2	Andaman Boobook	*Ninox affinis*	30	Brown-backed Needletail	*Hirundapus giganteus*
3	Andaman Bulbul	*Brachypodius fuscoflavescens*	31	Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*
4	Andaman Coucal	*Centropus andamanensis*	32	Changeable Hawk Eagle	*Nisaetus cirrhatus*
5	Andaman Crake	*Rallina canningi*	33	Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	*Merops leschenaulti*
6	Andaman Cuckoo Dove	*Macropygia rufipennis*	34	Cinnamon Bittern	*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*
7	Andaman Cuckooshrike	*Coracina dobsoni*	35	Collared Kingfisher	*Todiramphus chloris*
8	Andaman Drongo	*Dicrurus andamanensis*	36	Common Greenshank	*Tringa nebularia*
9	Andaman Flowerpecker	*Dicaeum virescens*	37	Common Hill Myna	*Gracula religiosa*
10	Andaman Green Pigeon	*Treron chloropterus*	38	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*
11	Andaman Masked Owl	*Tyto deroepstorffi*	39	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*
12	Andaman Nightjar	*Caprimulgus andamanicus*	40	Common Redshank	*Tringa totanus*
13	Andaman Scops Owl	*Otus balli*	41	Common Sandpiper	*Actitis hypoleucos*
14	Andaman Serpent Eagle	*Spilornis elgini*	42	Common Snipe	*Gallinago gallinago*
15	Andaman Shama	*Copsychus albiventris*	43	Crested Serpent Eagle	*Spilornis cheela*
16	Andaman Teal	*Anas albogularis*	44	Curlew Sandpiper	*Calidris ferruginea*
17	Andaman Treepie	*Dendrocitta bayleyii*	45	Daurian Starling	*Agropsar sturninus*
18	Andaman Woodpecker	*Dryocopus hodgei*	46	Dollarbird	*Eurystomus orientalis*
19	Asian Brown Flycatcher	*Muscicapa dauurica*	47	Dusky Warbler	*Phylloscopus fuscatus*
20	Asian Emerald Dove	*Chalcophaps indica*	48	Eastern Yellow Wagtail	*Motacilla tschutschensis*
21	Asian Fairy Bluebird	*Irena puella*	49	Eurasian Moorhen	*Gallinula chloropus*
22	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	50	Eyebrowed Thrush	*Turdus obscurus*
23	Barn Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*	51	Freckle-breasted Woodpecker	*Dendrocopos analis*
24	Black Baza	*Aviceda leuphotes*	52	Grey Heron	*Ardea cinerea*
25	Black-naped Monarch	*Hypothymis azurea*	53	Grey Wagtail	*Motacilla cinerea*
26	Black-naped Oriole	*Oriolus chinensis*	54	Grey-headed Swamphen	*Porphyrio poliocephalus*
27	Blue-tailed Bee-eater	*Merops philippinus*	55	Great Egret	*Ardea alba*
28	Brahminy Kite	*Haliastur indus*	56	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	*Dicrurus paradiseus*

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
57	Green Imperial Pigeon	*Ducula aenea*	81	Plume-toed Swiftlet	*Collocalia affinis*
58	Greenish Warbler	*Phylloscopus trochiloides*	82	Purple Heron	*Ardea purpurea*
59	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*	83	Red Collared Dove	*Streptopelia tranquebarica*
60	House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*	84	Red-breasted Parakeet	*Psittacula alexandri*
61	Hume's Boobook	*Ninox obscura*	85	Red-necked Stint	*Calidris ruficollis*
62	Indian Cuckoo	*Cuculus micropterus*	86	Red-whiskered Bulbul	*Pycnonotus jocosus*
63	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*	87	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*
64	Intermediate Egret	*Ardea intermedia*	88	Ruddy Turnstone	*Arenaria interpres*
65	Large Cuckooshrike	*Coracina macei*	89	Scarlet Minivet	*Pericrocotus speciosus*
66	Large-billed Crow	*Corvus macrorhynchos*	90	Small Minivet	*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*
67	Lesser Sand Plover	*Charadrius mongolus*	91	Stork-billed Kingfisher	*Pelargopsis capensis*
68	Lesser Whistling-duck	*Dendrocygna javanica*	92	Striated Heron	*Butorides striata*
69	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*	93	Vernal Hanging Parrot	*Loriculus vernalis*
70	Little Ringed Plover	*Charadrius dubius*	94	Watercock	*Gallicrex cinerea*
71	Long-tailed Parakeet	*Psittacula longicauda*	95	Whimbrel	*Numenius phaeopus*
72	Long-toed Stint	*Calidris subminuta*	96	White-bellied Sea Eagle	*Haliaeetus leucogaster*
73	Olive-backed Sunbird	*Cinnyris jugularis*	97	White-breasted Waterhen	*Amaurornis phoenicurus*
74	Orange-headed Thrush	*Geokichla citrina*	98	White-breasted Woodswallow	*Artamus leucorynchus*
75	Oriental Darter	*Anhinga melanogaster*	99	White-headed Starling	*Sturnia erythropygia*
76	Oriental Magpie Robin	*Copsychus saularis*	100	Edible-nest Swiftlet	*Aerodramus fuciphagus*
77	Oriental Pratincole	*Glareola maldivarum*	101	White-rumped Munia	*Lonchura striata*
78	Oriental Scops Owl	*Otus sunia*	102	White-throated Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*
79	Pacific Golden Plover	*Pluvialis fulva*	103	Wood Sandpiper	*Tringa glareola*
80	Pacific Reef Heron	*Egretta sacra*	104	Yellow Bittern	*Ixobrychus sinensis*

Some other photos taken during the trip:

Large Cuckooshrike

Red Collared Dove

Changeable Hawk Eagle

Asian Brown Flycatcher

Brahminy Kite

Curlew Sandpiper

Barn Swallow

Chestnut-headed Bee-eater

White-throated Kingfisher

Lesser Sand Plover

Black-naped Monarch

House Sparrow

Pacific Reef Heron dark morph

Common Redshank

Common Kingfisher

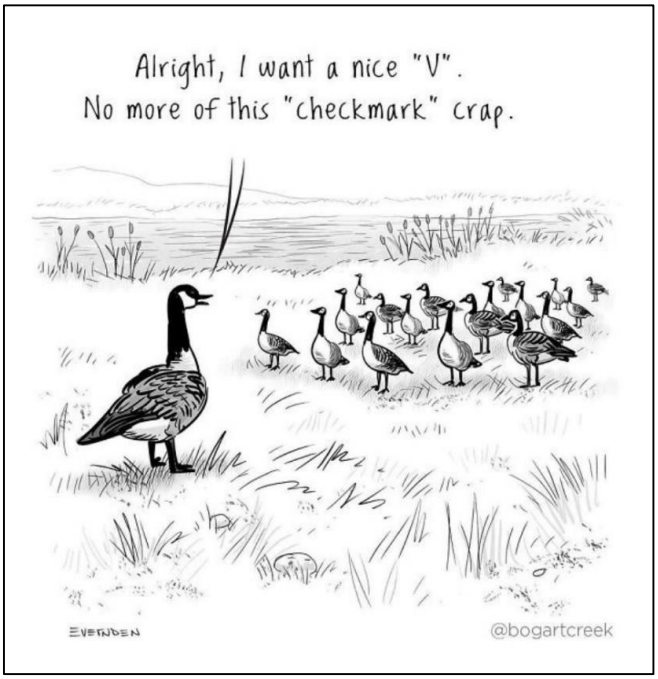
Grey Wagtail

Lesser Whistling-duck

* * *

Bird Humour

Umesh Mani



(From Facebook, November 13, 2021)

* * *

Bird of the Month

Text and Photo: Umesh Mani

Indian Silverbill (*Euodice malabarica*)

Indian Silverbill (Rollapadu, October 12, 2019)

Order: Passeriformes
Family: Estrildidae
Genus: *Euodice*
Species: *E. malabarica*
Size: 11-11.5 cm

Description & distribution: The Indian Silverbill, also known as the White-throated Munia, is a small passerine seen commonly across Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and nearby regions (except Bangladesh) in drier parts up to about 2000m elevation. It is also an introduced species in many other parts of the world.

The Indian Silverbill is easily recognized, with its thick conical silver-grey bill, plain earthy brown upperparts and white underparts with buff flanks. The tail is black with white upper tail coverts, and the wings are dark brown, contrasting with a white rump. The tail seems pointed as the length of the tail feathers is maximum at the centre and reduces outwards. The sexes are alike, though the female is duller with a plainer face and less barred flanks. Juvenile birds have buff underparts, dark mottling on rump and a shorter and more rounded tail.

Habitat & behaviour: The Indian Silverbill is gregarious and usually seen in flocks of up to 60 birds in dry open scrub country. It inhabits dry, open cultivated areas, scrub and bush areas, as well as fallow land, but avoids humid tracts. It forages in small groups, and feeds mainly on a wide range of grass and weed seeds, rice, as well as other crop species, taken from the ground or off the feathery ears on low shrubs and grass stalks. It may also occasionally take winged termites. Its usual call is a feeble musical chirrup, similar to most other Munias. The contact call is a *tchrip* or *tchreep*, flight call is a repeated *chir-rup* and the song is a series of short, abrupt trilling notes.

Nesting: The Indian Silverbill is a resident breeder across most of its range. It can breed practically around the year, with local variations – it generally nests in winter in southern India, and after summer in northern India. The typical nest is a large, untidy globular structure with a side opening, made of coarse grasses, lined with softer flowering grass; cotton wool taken from nearby fields may also be used. Nests are usually placed on low shrubs, though they are often seen below the platform nests of storks or vultures. It also often utilises abandoned nests of the Baya Weaver, and its own disused nests serve as family dormitories through the year for roosting. The usual clutch consists of 4-8 pure white eggs. Incubation and parental duties are shared by both parents, although other birds may be involved in rearing the young.

Local name: The The Indian Silverbill is known as *'Charchara, 'Charga', Charakka'* or *'Pidda'* in Hindi, *'Jinuwayi'* in Telugu, *'Vayalatta'* in Malayalam, *'Nellu kuruvi'* in Tamil and *'Piduri'* or *'Sar munia'* in Bengali.

* * *